

Kati Rodriguez (mother to Gabriel James Maurice Rodriguez), 39 yo, Newark, NJ

COVID 19 History Project, Newark Public Library

On March 11, my husband told me he didn't think we should leave the house anymore. My son's spring break was coming up, and I figured he would stay in school until spring break and then we would re-evaluate. But my husband had been hearing news from Italy, about how the coronavirus was overwhelming their healthcare system. He isn't a worrier, so it struck me that he wanted us home. We decided not to leave the house anymore, unless we had to.

At first, I kept us very busy with as much normalcy as possible. Even though it was my son's spring break, we did school every day, exercise, art, an activity.

On March 17, my son broke his arm falling off his bunk bed. We had to go to the ER, and it turned out my son needed surgery. The hospital had changed their policies so that adults could not have any visitors with them, and children could only have one visitor, but that visitor could not have a cough or fever. Since I had a cough, I wasn't allowed to be with him.

I didn't want to be far from him, so I stayed in my car in the parking lot almost all night long. I put blankets over the windows and slept when I could in the front seat. It broke my heart to be apart from him, but I told him if he missed me he could know that I was just a few feet away outside in my car.

The parking lot was filled with other visitors who didn't know what to do. The policy was new, so people hadn't really been expecting to have to be apart from their loved ones. So they just stayed in their cars. I could hear them on their cell phones from my car, and everyone was talking about the coronavirus.

After my son broke his arm, I started feeling overwhelmed. Whatever sense I had of being safe at home, able to control our schedule and life just as it was before, was gone.

I know I don't have control over a lot right now. But maybe it's better that I had to face that. Once I started focusing on things I could control, the first thing I did was stop watching the news. The news is going 24 hours a day with so many new developments. But very little of it is actionable. We are already staying home, wearing masks when we go out, and beyond that there's not much we can do.

That has opened up some space mentally for some of the good. People are creating virtual communities, and we are connecting with people all over the world.

We participated in the Between Art and Quarantine challenge, recreating famous works of art with household items. Thousands of people all over the world joined in.

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Every year, I participate in an Instagram challenge asking people to wear outfits inspired by Disney characters every day of March. This year, the group participating was like a life raft, and with their outfits, everyone shared their fears and concerns. Seeing people creating during this has been really powerful and also fun.

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We have painted, journaled, made chalk art, and pitched a tent and camped outside in our courtyard. My son is in an online class making a podcast and is learning how to fence. I joined an online dance class. But we have also cut out a lot of things, and are being gentler with our schedule. I'm not trying to make this like life before. It's nothing like that.

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With the time my husband used to spend commuting, he plays board games with us. We have started a month-long board game called Gloom Haven together as a family. We have the month now, the time to play it together as a family.

On April 9, my dog Ace had to be put to sleep. He has been my shadow for fourteen years, but I could not be with him when his life ended. My grief over my dog seems so obscene right now. To grieve a pet when others have grief so much larger. And even though I know that is the wrong way to think of things, I can't help but think it.

I want to go outside, to go to my gym, and the corner store, and to a museum. I want to get into my car and drive. To visit my nieces and nephew. But also, I wonder when will I ever be able to leave again. How will I ever overcome this fear and anxiety, which leads me to quarantine groceries for two days, then scrub them with soap. Every time one of our family members comes home from an errand, I make them strip down and leave those clothes in a garbage bag outside the house for two days before I bring the clothes in to wash them. I wash my hands until they bleed, like we all do, or everyone I know.

I don't know what it means, to be inside making Tik Toks, and participating in Instagram challenges, to lose sleep and cry, to make crafts, and play too many video games, and worry about things nameable and unnameable and then to play board games together as a family.

To cringe when I see a news headline, having become so delicate that even the thought of what's outside my doors scares me. And then, at the same time, to wish for what's outside my doors so viscerally, to want to have an excuse to walk to the mailbox or the corner or anywhere at all.

I miss strangers ordering coffee, and scolding their children, and packing their backpacks. The other day my upstairs neighbor was building something and vacuuming. I stood in my hallway listening to those noises, grateful to be in that goo of humanity again, existing so near to someone I could hear, wondering about his life. Whatever it was that he was building melded with all the things I have ever built, and, by God's grace, ever will. My husband issued a pro forma complaint without malice- "What the hell is he building up there?" The same thing anyone ever has or ever will.

I never realized how I soaked in other people's moments, how much joy comes from being a human alive near other humans, crossing paths and sorting out our humanity, alone and together.